

Literary film adaptations, film policy and the nation
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Proposal

The dominant modernist conception of nationalism states that nations and nationalism are social and discursive constructions (see Gellner, 2006; Hobsbawm, 1990; Smith, 1994). Benedict Anderson (1999) further considers the concept of a nation as an ‘imagined community’. For a nation, concepts such as ‘national history’ and ‘national culture’, in which a literary patrimony takes a significant place, are a *sine qua non*. Within the nation-building process, film and other mass media play an extremely important role (e.g. Higson, 1995). Most research on the relation between film and nation-building focuses on the representation of a national history and identity in films. However, only little research has been conducted to the relation between film and a national literary patrimony. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine the role of literary film adaptations for the preservation and construction of a national literary patrimony. Hereby, we focus on the role played by the state, by means of its film policy, in this context. This paper will focus on the specific situation in Flanders, since its recent political history makes it a particularly interesting case in relation to nation-building.

The relation between literary film adaptations, film policy and nation-building will be explored through a multi-methodological research. First, we will analyse the history of literary film adaptations in Flanders. For this purpose we rely on a database with adaptation and other information on all Flemish films. Second, we will examine the role of the state through a film policy analysis with regard to literary film adaptations. Hereby, we will focus on how this role can be related to the nation-building process. Through these analyses, the preservation and construction of a national literary patrimony will be at the center of interest.

Paper

1 Introduction

In this paper I'll be focusing on the film policy on adaptations of literary classics in Flanders, in the period from 1964 until 1993, hereby highlighting the role of cultural memory within a nationalist discourse.

2 Theory

2.1 Nationalism

In nationalist movements' striving for internal unity, whereby the cultural and the political unity are heavily intertwined, relies mainly on discursive concepts like a national history, a common language, a national character, a shared culture, and, through all of these aspects, a collective memory.

For the construction and consolidation of a shared cultural memory, the importance of literature can hardly be overestimated. With his concept of 'print capitalism', Benedict Anderson has pointed out how literature and newspapers contribute to the construction of a nation, or, as Anderson puts it, an imagined community. Hereby, both institutional aspects – the very existence of a national literary patrimony – and textual aspects – the kind of stories that are being told – are highly important.

As Andrew Higson has pointed out, film, as any other mass medium or form of popular culture, also plays a substantial role in the nation-building process. One way how films can do this, is by adapting works from the national literary patrimony. In this respect, James Naremore (2000a) rightly stresses the fact that, already in the late 1940s, André Bazin has suggested that one of the functions of adaptation is "the creation of national or cultural mythology".

In this context, 'memory', which Catherine Grant (2002) calls the process of 'recall', plays a crucial role. As John Ellis has stated: and I quote, "The adaptation trades upon the memory of the novel, a memory that can derive from actual reading, or, as is more likely with a classic of literature, a generally circulated cultural memory".

2.2 Flemish film policy

Whereas since the 1960s, most European films, and especially those of smaller countries and regions such as Flanders, have been largely dependent of government support, the decision

authority on which projects that will or will not be realized, for a large part lies with film policy. When we link this observation with the fact that, by the end of the 1950s, the previous mainly cultural Flemish movement became definitively prominent on a political level, the question on the relation between film policy and ideas of nation-building practices, almost automatically surfaces.

The selective, culture-orientated support in Flanders started in 1964, when the Belgian Government passed a Royal Decree ‘for the promotion of the Dutch-language film culture’, and established a ‘Selection Commission for Cultural Films’. From then on, filmmakers could apply for a grant to this commission, who subsequently handed in a motivated, but non-binding advice to the competent minister, who, in the end, took the final decision.

In 1993, the Foundation Film in Flanders was established, and the Selection Commission for Cultural Films was replaced with a new but similar commission, the Flemish Audiovisual Selection Commission. From 2002 on, the much more independent Flanders Audiovisual Fund became operative. For this study, we have chosen to focus only on the period of the Selection Commission for Cultural Films, which lasts from 1964 to 1993.

3 Method

For this research, I’ve relied in the first place on archival material from the Flemish government, consisting of subsidy dossiers of every supported film and 308 commission meeting reports, of which you see an example from 1976 here. This material contained a lot of financial and production-related documents, correspondence between the different actors, information on the broader film policy discourse, and the support advices of the commission to the minister. We’ve complemented this archival material, of which we should of course be clearly aware that these documents have been created by the film policy staff themselves, with a large database of realized Flemish films, consisting of data ranging from production data over textual data to reviews and published interviews with the people involved in the production of the films.

4 Results

4.1 Flemish film adaptations

Before 1964, the Flemish film sector gave birth to relatively few adaptations. Looking at this graph, we see that from the second half of the 1960s, until the beginning of the 1980s, more than half of the supported films were adaptations, after which this number decreased. Thus, in the first decennia of the Flemish film production policy, there seems to be quite a strong preference for adaptations. Following this, many filmmakers, but also critics, have stated, often somewhat oversimplified, that when a filmmaker wanted to be certain to get support, he or she just had to adapt a work of literature, and most preferably a classic of the Flemish literary patrimony.

It is no coincidence that those voices refer to Flanders' literary patrimony. Even though only 17 from the 119 films which were produced between 1964 and 1993 can be classified as adaptations of this patrimony, the visibility of these films, being the most prominent, prestigious and popular films, was very high. This led to a widespread conception that the Flemish film tradition from the 1960s to the 1980s was pervaded by Flemish heritage films based upon a classic novel or play.

4.2 Different commissions

Now, when going through the large amount of archival material, the first thing that immediately catches the eye, is that we can roughly distinguish two periods, whereby the first period lasts from 1964 until 1983, equaling the period of the first two commissions. The second period then runs from 1983 until 1993, equaling the period of the third and the fourth commission. Let's start with the first period, whereby the first chairman was Joz Van Liempt, a pro-Flemish catholic, as was the minister of culture. This pro-Flemish background of the film policy actors was clearly reflected in the discussions and advices of the commission, something that would prove to be a constant with the succeeding commissions as well.

4.2.1 First period

Although the Royal Decree speaks about the "Dutch-language film culture", without further specification of this 'culture'-concept, the first film commission, as well as the first ministers, clearly conceived culture as the high culture, or art, while excluding popular, more low-brow culture or pure entertainment.

In line with this concern, several commission members apparently saw the adaptation of literary classics as a highly cultural practice true to the perceived spirit of the Royal Decree.

When the first real heritage project, 'Mira', applied for a grant, the commission was quite enthusiastic about an adaptation of a work by the Flemish pastoral writer Stijn Streuvels. This film became an enormous popular success, which caused several other Mira-like projects to be put in the pipeline.

However, the commission turned several of these projects down, and when the production company Kunst & Kino proposed 'The Conscript', a film based upon the novel of the same name by Hendrik Conscience, the most important literary figure of the Flemish movement, the commission, and I quote, "warns that the Mira-line should not be continued, in spite of certain positive aspects and popular approval". It turns out that certain members of the commission were heavily worried that these films would become what they call "too folkloristic". Indeed, with this, they suggested the nostalgic kind of heritage films of which Andrew Higson would have no problem at all to make a nationalist analysis of them.

Many such concerns were being made, and it proves that it would be unjust to label the commission as an outright supporter of classic literary adaptations and heritage films because of its pro-Flemish background.

In many cases, quite the contrary was true, as the commission expressed on several occasions a strong preference for original scripts. In a discussion about the adaptation of Willem Elsschot's 'Will o' the Wisp', the commission, and I quote "regrets that an original script is being sacrificed for an exploitation of the literary patrimony". Also, the commission found to its regret, and I quote "that our filmmakers are more concerned with the social reality of the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, than with the present social reality."

The reasons why several of this kind of projects were getting realized in spite of these objections by the commission, are manifold. For one thing, the commission didn't internally agree on the folkloristic critique. There's a lot of ambiguity here, and especially in the following commissions, from 1978 on, these critical voices were losing ground.

Another factor that could play in the advantage, or the disadvantage, of films was the ultimate power of the minister of culture. For example, when the overtly nationalistic film and television series 'The Lion of Flanders', based on the mythic novel by again Hendrik Conscience, applied

for a grant, the commission gave an unanimously negative advice, but the minister decided to support the project anyway, for an amount of almost the quarter of that year's film budget.

Another reason was the perceived shortage of good scripts. The commission then seemed to assume that a good book would have more chance to provide at least some basis for a good film narrative. Another, quite hidden factor, was the active lobbying of production companies. Especially Kunst & Kino, having produced a large number of the Flemish heritage films, is worth mentioning here. Being probably the most professional production company in Flanders, Kunst & Kino submitted well-cared-for application dossiers, and gave the guarantee of a professional made film, two aspects that were highly appreciated by the commission. But above all, Kunst & Kino was a very obstinate production company that succeeded in imposing their will through the producer's persuasiveness and diplomatic strategies. Whenever the commission had a negative attitude against a project of Kunst & Kino, the filmmakers promised to meet their wishes.

Sometimes, this 'promising' went even further. For example, in an attempt to convince the commission to support the film 'Pallieter', the producer committed himself to, and I quote "to assure the distribution and sale of two or more films of young filmmakers, and this as if it were my own productions".

When the films were finished however, the commission always had to express its disappointment, finding out that their objections had been largely put aside by the filmmakers. For example, after the screening of 'Flaxfield', based upon a pastoral novel by again Stijn Streuvels, the commission stated that, and I quote, "the initial fear about Flaxfield has not been taken away by the final outcome, this film is part of the package of traditional Flemish heimat films".

4.2.2 Second period

Now, as I mentioned, the policies of the first two commissions were quite similar. However, we can already discover some evolutions in this first period, such as a lessening of the purely elitist view on 'culture' as high culture.

This evolution experiences a boost in the 1980s, when liberal ministers of culture took the place of the previous Christian democrat ministers, and especially when the third commission, under the chairmanship of René Adams, was established in 1983. In a statement on its film policy, the commission made a plea for the popular film, breaking definitively with the elitist vision on

culture of the first two commissions. The several popular comedies from the 1980s on are the living proof that the commission suited the action to the word.

At the same time, the Flemish heritage films were not forgotten. The new commission even took on a much more straightforward pro-Flemish attitude. Illustrative for the difference on this point between the two commissions led by René Adams on the one hand, and the previous commissions on the other, are ‘A Peasant’s Psalm’ and ‘Van Paemel Family’, both so-called Flemish peasant films.

Already in 1970, a ‘Van Paemel Family’-project was submitted for the first time, but the commission turned it down, because of the source text that they found inappropriate to adapt. Eleven years later, in 1981, a project based on the same source text was submitted again, this time by Paul Cammermans, but the second commission wasn’t convinced neither. However, the third commission immediately expressed a great interest in Cammermans’ adaptation of Cyriel Buysse’s famous play. Although there were still some production-related problems, the minister formulated, and I quote “his willingness to support this project from our own soil with supplementary grants”.

‘A Peasant’s Psalm’, based on the 1935 novel of the same name by Felix Timmermans, forms a similar case. When in 1967 the adaptation of this book was proposed, the commission judges that, and I quote “such literary work is not any longer a topical subject”. Apparently, twenty years later, this work had become topical, as the new commission under René Adams gave it immediately a positive advice, without any further discussion.

This clearly very positive attitude of the Adams-commissions against the literary patrimony is striking. Practically all such projects almost immediately received support.

However, only few of them got actually produced as well, mostly due to production-related problems, as was the case with a big, prestigious project on Till Eulenspiegel that was never made despite the generous support of the commission.

5 Conclusion

Now, to get to some kind of conclusion, we could say that the different commissions always bore a quite strong pro-Flemish attitude, which was reflected in their discourse on adaptations of literary classics. But while in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a kind of ambiguous attitude on adaptations of literary classics, with some commission members fearing nostalgic folklore films,

the commissions in the 1980s were much less balanced in their considerations of these kind of films. However, I would like to stress the point that it's quite hard to make any claims about the Flemish film policy, as it covers many different layers. Apart from acknowledging, first, the existence of different commissions over time, and second, the internal contradictions that exist within a certain commission, one also has to be aware that there has to be made a distinction between the commission's advices, and the actual policy of the succeeding ministers of culture, who often seemed to privilege the more prestigious Flemish heritage films. And, although there's lots to say about the film policy actors, we should not forget that the production companies themselves also played an important role in the production of adaptations of classic literary works.